

THE AUK:

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF
ORNITHOLOGY.

VOL. I.

OCTOBER, 1884.

No. 4.

THE CANADA GOOSE (*BERNICLA CANADENSIS*.)

BY JAMES P. HOWLEY.

ONE of the chief game birds of Newfoundland is the Canadian Goose (*Bernicla canadensis*). When I term it a game bird I might state that owing to the peculiarity of its habits, or perhaps to the physical character of this country, few Wild Geese fall to the gun of our sportsmen proper, who confine themselves chiefly to Grouse hunting, and the shooting of smaller game. The labor and difficulty of access to the true breeding grounds of the Wild Goose, in the far interior, effectually protects it, and it is only during the spring and fall migrations that any appreciable number are killed.

This Goose is a regular annual visitant to Newfoundland, coming along from the southward in the early spring, arriving here in the month of April, remaining during the breeding season, and again taking its departure about the latter half of October. They breed abundantly on this island, depositing their eggs in very simply constructed nests, of dried leaves and grass, on the islets in the bog holes or tarns, which so plentifully dot the large peat savannas prevailing over considerable areas of the interior. They generally select localities for the purpose of incubation not far removed from the margin of some of the numerous

streams and brooks which intersect the island in all directions, and have their outlet in various arms and inlets which indent the shores of our island on every side. To these latter they invariably conduct their young broods as soon as they become strong enough on the wing, and for some time prior to taking their departure they frequent these fiords, where an abundant supply of food is obtainable. A long, slender, reed-like grass, which grows most luxuriantly in the shallow, brackish waters, known as goose grass, is the especial attraction in these places.

Not having had the good luck to have ever actually seen a Wild Goose's nest myself, I am unable to say positively how many eggs they lay, but judging from the numerous broods of young goslings I have time and again come across, I should say they rarely exceed half a dozen. The eggs are white, somewhat smaller than those of the tame Goose, and more elongated in form.

At this point I would venture to correct a mistake made in a very interesting and instructive work entitled 'Game Birds of the United States,' by Thomas Alexander, author of 'Fish and Fishing,' published in the United States in 1879. Writing of the Canada Goose, Mr. Alexander says: "He comes up from the south with the earliest spring, bravely making the longest known migrations in search of a breeding place. How far north he goes before his particular taste in this matter is satisfied is unknown, *for no mortal eye has yet gazed upon the breeding places of the Canada Goose.*" This is an egregious error, as any one in this country having the remotest knowledge of its wild-fowl can easily demonstrate.

The Canadian Goose undoubtedly does find its way to more northern regions, even perhaps beyond the limits reached by the most famous Arctic explorers, and perhaps has solved the problem that has baffled and defied generations of the hardest navigators, but I opine the summer season within the Arctic Circle is of scarcely sufficient duration for the incubatory purposes of birds which require six months to mature.

No matter what high latitudes the Canada Goose may have been observed in, it is well known to breed here every summer. It is quite a common practice with the fishermen in the outlying settlements to make expeditions into the country in spring, in search of the young broods of Geese, which they frequently capture and bring out before they are able to effect their escape.

The eggs also are frequently taken away, and afterwards placed under a tame Goose to be hatched. The young so captured are easily domesticated, becoming exceedingly tame, and presenting in this respect a great contrast to the same bird in its wild state. When reared they are sold to amateur poultry fanciers in the Capital and elsewhere, where good prices are realized for them. At any season of the year, even now in mid-winter, numbers of these domesticated Wild Geese may be seen in the poultry yards about St. John's. They breed in their captivity both *inter se* and with the common domestic Goose, producing a hybrid bird much esteemed for the table.

While all other birds are protected here by a strict game law, which establishes a close time and heavy penalty for its infraction, Geese alone are excepted, simply not to interfere with the small source of emolument derived by the fisherman from the capture of the young birds and eggs, as I have described. It is considered that the migratory and wary character of the bird prevents any appreciable injury resulting from this course. Still, the morality of legalizing such an interference with any animals valuable to man, during their procreative period, is, to say the least of it, very questionable.

During the breeding season they moult the primary wing- and tail-feathers, and are consequently unable to fly in the months of June, July, and the early part of August. They keep very close during this moulting season, and are rarely seen by day; yet I have frequently come across them at such times in the far interior, and on many occasions have caught them alive. When surprised on some lone lake or river side, they betake themselves at once to the land, and run very swiftly into the bush or tall grass to hide. But they appear somewhat stupid, and if they can succeed in getting their heads out of sight under a stone or stump, imagine they are quite safe from observation. When overtaken in the water, and hard pressed, they will dive readily, remaining a considerable time beneath, swimming or running on the bottom very fast. About the 15th of August the old birds, and most of the young ones, are capable of flight, and from thence to the first of September they rapidly gain strength of wing. Soon after this they betake themselves to the seaside, congregating in large flocks in the shallow estuaries or deep fiords, to feed during the night-time, but are off again to the barrens at earliest dawn, where

they are generally to be found in daytime. Here they feed on the wild berries, of which the common blueberry, partridge berry, marsh berry, and a small black berry (*Empetrum nigrum*) afford them an abundant supply. They are exceedingly wary at this season, and there is no approaching them at all on the barrens. The only means of getting a shot at them, and that usually adopted by the fishermen, is to erect a kind of blind, termed a *gaze*, near the margins of the estuaries or lagoons most frequented by the birds, and within easy range of their favorite resting places. The gaze is formed of a rough, semi-circular framework of bush and small trees, inside of which a couple of persons may lie concealed. This contrivance must be constructed prior to the time when the birds are expected to arrive, so that they may see and become familiar with it, otherwise, such is their suspicious nature, they would leave the place altogether, or at least avoid the immediate neighborhood of the gaze, keeping well out of shot. If unsuspecting of danger they will swim about in close phalanx, and when within easy range, the concealed hunters pour heavy charges of large shot from their huge sealing-guns into them, and frequently do great execution. The long and patient watch during a cold October night, however, takes away much of the pleasurable element from this rather unsportsmanlike mode of hunting, and as a consequence few resort to it except the hardy fisherman and patient Indian, to whom the killing of a few couples of Geese means a good night's work. I have myself frequently tried to steal a march upon the Geese during a dark night in a canoe, but never succeeded in getting within shot.

During the spring migration a nearly similar plan is adopted by the fishermen to that described above, the only difference being that the gaze is erected on the ice, near open water, in our bays and fiords, the gaze itself being built of blocks of ice and snow. When the Geese alight in these open places during the night, they will swim along by the edge of the ice, picking the goose grass which may be washed up against it, quite unsuspecting of danger till they are suddenly fired upon from the ice gaze. A great number are sometimes killed in this way.

I am credibly informed that many of these first arrivals, when opened, have been found to contain undigested grains of Indian corn. This circumstance I think argues strongly in favor of the

very rapid flight of the bird northward; the grain, I presume, being picked up either in the southern or midland States of the American Union. They are a very powerful bird on the wing. Rising at first slowly from the water, they fly rather low for a time, but soon ascend, and, forming a hollow wedge or V, with an old gander at the apex, continue for long distances before again alighting. About the last of October they are generally all gone, but I have heard of stragglers being seen even in mid-winter.

BIRDS OF THE LOWER URUGUAY.

BY WALTER B. BARROWS.

(*Concluded from p. 278.*)

184. *Charadrius virginicus* *Borkh.* CHORLO (PLOVER).—Seen only in the neighborhood of Bahia Blanca and the Sierra de la Ventana from February 8 to March 19. During most of this time it was abundant in flocks of twenty to two hundred individuals, and for the first week or two all the larger flocks were moving pretty uniformly in a south or southwesterly direction; a fact which I could account for only by supposing that the plains of Patagonia must offer some strong attraction in the way of food at this season.

185. *Eudromias modesta* (*Licht.*). CHORLITO (LITTLE PLOVER).—Taken but twice at Concepcion, viz., April 29, and May 6, 1880; while a few specimens, either of this or the following species, were observed on the pampas during March and April, 1881.

186. *Ægialitis falklandica* (*Lath.*).—One specimen, Concepcion, April 30, 1880, and the doubtful observations mentioned under the preceding species.

187. *Ægialitis collaris* (*Vieill.*). CHORLITO (LITTLE PLOVER).—Rather abundant at Concepcion in March and August, in small flocks all over the open country. Probably a few winter there.